

Three Years

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Summary: Hiccup can teach his father everything possible about dragons, but there's one lesson even the Dragon Master doesn't know, and it's one that Stoick is about to suffer.

Three Years

****Three Years****

It'd been three years, and nothing'd gone wrong yet.

Stoick paced through his house, his hands rubbing together nervously. His helm was off, lying askew on the table, and his bare head felt vulnerable and small without its familiar cold weight. He wanted the protective feeling it brought, wanted the reassurance that he had power over his life, as it had once saved it. But whenever his hand approached it, he grimaced and turned away. Those were dragon horns atop that great helm. He couldn't think about dragons now. Or maybe it was the only thing he could think about.

Three years. Nothing wrong. All normal. All perfectly fine.

He could hear Hiccup pattering about upstairs, his voice a low hum as he talked to his dragon. He heard his son say something a little lower than before, and the Night Fury crooned in response, deep and stressed. The house was drenched in that stress. It was mostly Stoick's fault.

Three years. Nothing wrong. All normal. All safe.

Until a few months ago.

Age was something terrible and wonderful. It brought wisdom and wickedness in equal measure, sore joints and sorrow, aches and wrinkles and a unique kind of humor children couldn't appreciate. It was inevitable, unavoidable; everyone knew it, everyone dealt with

it. The signs of age were so ingrained into the minds and bodies of humans that others could sense senility like mosquitoes could sense blood, sure and creeping.

Everyone knew how to identify age. In humans. Not even Hiccup knew how to tell when it came to dragons.

Three years of freedom, and laughter, and a joy he couldn't have imagined. Three years of a newly-forged bond with Hiccup he couldn't have understood before as they finally gained something in common. Three years of the exhilaration of fighting and playing bestride a beast so powerful he would have only thought to kill it before, but could now only look at it with affection.

Three years. Until a few months ago.

Until Thornado started eating less.

Until Thornado started sleeping more than anything.

Until his mighty roars lost vigor, and he couldn't even bring down a shrub.

The last few weeks had been the worst. The Thunderdrum's wings began to shake, and he refused to fly at all. His scales began to fall out, he got thinner, his eyes lost their fire and became dull and lusterless. He spent his days curled up beside Stoick and Hiccup's house, dozing endlessly.

It was jarring, to say the least. Normally the dragon was spry and energetic, and full of loud noises waiting to be let out. On sunny days he was more playful than Toothless, and liked to climb to the roof of Stoick's house and tackle him to the ground when the chief walked out. His sudden lack of vigor was like Stoick losing his helmet, or his great red beard; it was instantly noticeable, and a stressful and confusing loss.

Stoick had tried. Oh, he had tried. He'd tried coaxing the dragon with scratches, coos, his favorite foods. He tried shoving him upright, sure that if the dragon only regained his feet he would leap up again, ready for anything. He even disregarded his fire-forged lessons of compatibility and kindness when he found himself ranting at his dragon, his voice rising from a low growl to a hoarse shout, demanding to know why the dragon was acting so, why he lazed about all the time lately, why he was acting like he was . . .

. . . dying.

_You're not old! _Stoick had insisted. _Yeh don't have an excuse! Git up off the ground and prove me wrong!_

The proof never came. Instead of roaring right back like he usually would have, Thornado had moaned in distress to his human's anger, and turned away. Stoick had stormed inside, his insides roiling with fury. _He's not old, _he repeated to himself over and over as his eyes began to prickle strangely. _An' he's not dyin'. He's _not.

Hiccup had looked the Thunderdrum over at an oblique suggestion from his father, and the moment Stoick saw his face he knew it was over.

_He's . . . not good, Dad, _his son had said, and repeated this in various avoiding-the-subject ways until Stoick had demanded he tell the truth.

_He's just dying, Dad. We've never had a Thunderdrum to take notes on before, but we've seen dragons die. _He'd listed various symptoms and physical calamities that Stoick couldn't bring himself to want to remember. And as though to kick Stoick while he was wounded, his son had relayed the always-known and inevitable cause.

He's old, Dad. He's really old. It was never really clear, but now I can definitely tell from his scales, his teeth. . . . He must've been already old when you tamed him.

Already old. As though that was supposed to rationalize it. Make it better. Make Stoick _feel_ better.

He didn't know what to do with himself. His duties slipped from his fingers, and he grew distant from other people, including Hiccup and Gobber. When he woke up in the morning he woke with an icy trepidation, and was reluctant to rise and leave the house. Things that were second nature now felt like chores.

Stoick's mind now constantly roiled with confused feelings, ones he hadn't known existed ever before. It was as though a block of something sticky and cold like tar had congealed around his insides, and a thousand-ton weight had descended upon his broad shoulders. His fingers clenched and unclenched and shook when he wasn't looking. He swallowed constantly, and breathed shallowly. He thought he was sick, but stubbornly refused to talk to anyone about it, even when those around him noticed his erratic behavior. Hiccup had pleaded with him to talk to him, Gobber had demanded outright what was on his mind, Hoark was oblivious, Spitelout knew but didn't understand. . .

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Stoick couldn't rightly explain what he was feeling to himself. He couldn't think of being the chief of Berk when all that dominated his thoughts was the Thunderdrum lying outside. As a team, Stoick and Thornado were unstoppable. They had toured galaxies under the night sky. They had learned to harness Thornado's spectacular voice. They had brought equality and understanding to tribes hundreds of miles away. They had leveled forests, crushed mountains, tamed seas. Together.

Stoick jerked his hand back after another unconscious attempt to don his helm. The flames in the fireplace cast flickering light over its metal surface, becoming warped and distorted when they met the four scratches carving trenches near the top, between the horns. He'd gotten that little mishap during a raid years ago, back when dragons were nameless and voiceless and savage. A Nadder had bowled him over and tried to dig its claws into his skull; the helm saved his life, and sustained only metal scratches instead of allowing rent flesh and bone. The Nadder flew off, but Stoick hunted it down later and slew it singlehandedly, and without weapons. _Even after you're gone, you're always lookin' out fer me, Val._

Stoick sighed, and clenched his jaw when a rouge wave of an indiscernible emotion overtook him. _Tell me what tae do, Val,_ he pleaded silently. _You always had the best advice fer me. You and I, we could talk through anythin', together. Help me._

He bowed his head, thinking of Valhalla and his wife waiting for him there. _I don't know what it is I'm doin'. I'm the chief, but . . . all I can think about is this dragon._ _I'm feelin' things, and I can't sleep, and- It's not like it was with you, Val. With you, there wasn't a warnin', you were jes . . . gone. _Stoick stared hard at the floor. _But I know he's dyin' now, an' it's been so long, an' . . . I can't take it. I don't want to lose him. I don't know what tae do. Please._

He felt like he could hear her laughter, and thought fondly of her smile. It was the one she donned when they shared a personal joke, or watched their little son play, or when she rolled her eyes at some clumsy thing he'd done. He remembered the day he'd smashed her mother's prize axe handle, the one made impractically of porcelain, and, ashamed, blamed it on a rouge Terrible Terror. Oh, she'd rolled her eyes at that one. "How'd yeh know it was me?" he'd demanded when she cornered him.

"First of all," she'd said, "yeh always hated that axe handle. Second, I don't see a dead Terror in yer hand. You wouldn't let one in the house, near Hiccup or me. I know yeh too well, Stoick. Yeh run from yer problems. Not the chiefly ones, the personal ones."

She'd known him well. They'd known each other well, in every way. But she was gone, and he could only see her smile in his fading memory, or hear her laughter in the creaks of their house.

It was dark out now, Stoick could see. The stars were coming out in his window, and the sky was tinged orange and pink where the sun was setting. It would have been beautiful, even if he'd seen it countless times before, if the weight had not been pressing down on his shoulders, or the tar slowing down his heart.

He looked at the door and, after an eternity, strode toward it. He opened it, stepped outside, and closed it quietly, a soft breeze ruffling his beard. The village was preparing for the night, he could see, though none could see him. His front door was at an awkward angle to look up at, and he had no torches lit anyway.

He walked around the corner of the house, squinting to see in the setting sun's light. The darkness shifted near the wall, and an indigo mass with white spots, like a shard of the night sky fallen down to earth, materialized in front of him. Long yellowed teeth glinted in the darkness, and two slits of orange widened as Thornado opened his eyes.

Stoick approached him slowly and knelt in front of him, able to see him more quickly as his eyes adjusted. Thornado uncurled slightly and shifted closer to him, a low moan issuing out of his colossal throat. His stick-thin legs were curled underneath his body; they hadn't been properly used in days. The dragon blinked blearily, chattering his barbaric teeth.

Stoick rested a hand on the dragon's beaky snout, feeling the warmth and uneven surface where scales had fallen out and regrown halfheartedly, like buds waiting for spring. "Evenin', yeh lazy beast," Stoick murmured to him, running a knuckle against the exposed skin. "Yeh missed yer dinner."

Indeed, the Thunderdrum had refused food for the past few days, and his meals of haddock and crab (a personal favorite of both Stoick and Thornado) went untouched. He crooned, blinking slowly, staring into Stoick's eyes. His pupils were round as coins, making his eyes almost entirely black.

"Listen," Stoick began. "I'm sorry fer yellin' at you. I'm just a little frustrated with you, is all. Yer gettin' too lazy fer me. You keep this up an' I might have to get meself another dragon."

The dragon blinked again, letting out a puff of air through his nose. Stoick clenched his jaw, his heart beating hard. He was reminded of the worst moment of his life, when he'd discovered a lone black dragon lying close to death in the ashes of a devil. The helplessness, the hopelessness, the bewilderment, the question of _How can I recover from this?_ It was all too familiar, and creeping back up like a meal that didn't sit well.

"Listen," he said again, and his voice cracked. "I'm sorry. I know . . . I know I can be too rough at times, and I'm no Hiccup, but . . . I hope- I hope you think of me as a- a good rider, an' . . . maybe a friend, if yer smart enough to think that way. I think of you as one."

Thornado stared at him silently. Stoick couldn't return his gaze, and stared at the grass. "'S funny," he said aloud. "I never thought I'd be so worked up over this. Few years ago, yeh know, if I'd met you, I would've tried to kill yeh. Even after we let dragons on Berk, I hated 'em. I know, I know, they're not dangerous if yeh treat 'em well, yeah. But I didn't believe that, not really. Even after one of 'em, the worst of 'em, saved my son, I couldn't accept them."

Stoick dragged his gaze up from the ground and forced himself to look back at Thornado. They regarded each other unblinkingly, and Stoick felt something he couldn't deny. A wave of sorrow crashed over him, and he bit his lip like a child.

"Then I met you," he continued, "and I couldn't deny it anymore. Yer . . . yer amazing beasts, you know that? I don't know what it is about yeh, every time I see yeh, I started feelin' all funny. Yes, it's yer fault," he added, nodding and patting his dragon's nose. "Yeh infected me with something, I know it. Maybe it's some dragon disease, maybe it's just . . . you."

"Yer old now, I get it. I'm sorry I couldn't accept that either. Yer an old codger with too many years under his belt. I get it. I'm no Hiccup, I said already. I'm sorry I couldn't be everythin' yeh wanted me to be-"

Thornado snorted suddenly, and his wings twitched as he uncurled his thin legs. "Wait, yeh-" Stoick tried to protest, but the dragon dragged himself forward and heaved his colossal head onto Stoick's lap, burrowing his face in Stoick's chest. The dragon sighed and closed his eyes, a deep rumble issuing from the back of his throat as he purred.

Stoick stared down at him helplessly. _I just said I wasn't good enough,_ he wanted to say. _Why are yeh tryin' tae prove me wrong?_

He couldn't hold it in anymore, and leaned down, touching his forehead to his dragon's, closing his eyes. "I love you," he heard himself say as his eyes began to leak. He lost track of time, and couldn't find it in himself to care.

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The next morning Stoick was up before Hiccup, and went outside.

An hour or two later, Hiccup went downstairs to find his father kneeling before Thornado's body, weeping unashamedly with his hand on his dragon's snout.

It took several minutes to get Stoick, chief of Berk, to let go of the dragon and escort him inside for two mugs of hot tea and a long talk.

[illegible]

It took four men to lower Thornado's body into his grave beside Stoick's house. Dragons were virtually fireproof, and so the tradition of burning the body of the deceased at sea could not apply to them. Burials had become more and more common for both humans and dragons over the last three years.

Almost the entire village attended a silent prayer for the chief's dragon out of respect. Many had known how influential the pair had become, and how crucial they were to negotiating alliances with neighboring tribes. The pair alone was almost as revolutionary as the team of Hiccup and Toothless, and had garnered many a friendship and turned many a violent mind.

Eventually, past all the shoulder pats and sad smiles and "my condolences," Stoick was the only one left standing in front of the square patch of dirt beside his house, where a living Thornado had slumbered so long ago.

He stared at the dirt, as though he could see through it at his dragon below the earth. They had buried Thornado with several things he would need in his afterlife flight, including Stoick's saddle and his favorite log he would chew on and several baskets overflowing with haddock and crab.

Beneath his beard, Stoick smiled. He was tired, and he was grieving, but as he tilted his head up and looked at the sky he smiled.

Take care of him, Val, he prayed. _It's not exactly the death of a warrior, I know. Make him give you a few rides to pass the time. I know yer waiting for me. Both of you._

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****Welcome to the first fanfic on to ever have Thornado as a listed character. And it's a deathfic. You're welcome!****

**I don't know what this little quickie was. This popped into my head a few hours ago and I was like, "Yeah, I'll go with that." I've been meaning to do a "dragon dies" fic for a while now, though I always planned it to be a "middle-aged Hiccup deals with Toothless dying of

old age" kind of thing. Maybe I'll still do that.**

You know, Stoick's really grown on me. He's a very interesting character, and fun to write. I hope he was in character, guys.

R&R, if you will, and tell me what you thought!

End
file.